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Reconstructing air

Mathieu Poster

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A thesis Submitted to the faculty of the college of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Reconstructing Air

By Mathieu Poster

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This is dedicated to;
My mother for her support,
and
the memory of my father.

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In this paper I will describe the works that form my thesis. I will discuss the influences on my works, the ideas behind the works, my process of creating the works, and give an explanation of how the works have progressed and evolved to more fully represent my ideas.

The bulk of my final work consists of four medium to large scale sculptures, three wall pieces and three paintings. Many of the ideas for this work stem from earlier works I have done, which were influenced by my studies in the arts of Asian cultures. These early works were inspired mostly from formal elements found in simple, ritual artifacts, spiritual symbols and architectural elements. I found that these simple forms were easy to manipulate and change to create abstract sculptures, usually differing in size as well as material from the originals.

The first of these symbols was from the Shang Dynasty in China, a jade carving labeled *Tsung*. (Ill.#1)(1) This form has a cylindrical center surrounded by square components. I enjoy this simple contrast of organic material and geometric design. Its actual ritualistic use is unknown, but similar pieces of varying size were used in burial chambers, along with other symbols laid throughout the tomb. In some instances jade was fashioned into small tiles and connected to make a burial suit for the deceased. Small jade carvings were also

(2)

used to seal the orifices of the buried. Jade was believed to have supernatural qualities and was valued for its durability.(2)

Some of my other ideas came from the Thai spirit houses I saw while traveling in southeast Asia.(Ill.#2,3) These very ornate, open-air structures are placed outside of houses and businesses, usually before construction begins. They are covered with offerings of flowers, food, water and incense, and are intended as dwellings for spirits. The theory goes that by providing a place for spirits to live, they will have no reason to disturb you by living in your home. This is desirable, especially if the spirits are evil, and would, therefore, bring bad luck. (3) These structures come in many forms and styles but usually are comprised of four pillars with an ornate roof, sometimes cornered with carved "Chofa" (translated into 'sky tassel'(Ill.#2)(4) or 'sky hook'). The open-air construction of the structures allows the spirits to come and go as they please but also acts to attract them and keep them inside with the tempting treats left by the living. It is the overall design of the structures that I found interesting and that influenced the ideas for the outer structures of my sculptures.

In much of my new work I have expanded these symbols and structures into pieces that comment more on the abstract formal elements than on the sheer physical construction of them. I have reinterpreted these concepts in large scale steel and copper forms. Even though the original shapes of the symbols no longer exist physically in my work, the original ideas are still present in my mind while

I'm creating.

Complementing the concepts stated above, I also keep in mind the idea of air as a mass. This idea came to me not only through the experience of things in nature but also through my travels and art history experiences. I learned about Asian aesthetic and sculptural presence, particularly the idea that emptiness is as important as the opposite.

...the nature and function of emptiness and its flip side, fullness of being...Emptiness is not merely a neutral space serving to defuse the shock without changing the nature of the opposition. It is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave.

(Francois Cheng)(5)

This concept has led me to use air as part of a structure or emptiness as a part of something-ness. The idea is that a volume or mass exists before it is covered with something physical, something that contains the air. I think of it as if the air already has shape to it. I just create a volume to caress it, holding it immobile, but also allowing it to have the illusion of free movement.

Some other influences I have had throughout my career come from use and application of materials from various contemporary artists. Some of these artists interested me in the way they physically put their works together.

Joan Fitzgerald, a sculptor I met in Italy, works mainly in bronze. I was interested in her use and manipulation of the works in the wax form, before the

work is cast. She uses strips of wax in an additive process to build up a given work. This additive process is achieved by overlapping parts to incorporate space into the work, such as in her piece; *Cavallo Greco*, (Ill.#4)(6)

I am also interested in artists that use found and industrial objects to create large -scale work. These artists include: Arthur Ganson, a kinetic sculptor from Boston, Installation artist Nancy Rubins, (Ill.#5)(7) and Dennis Oppenheim, an artist who uses industrial and found objects to make conceptual works like *Parallels Between Machinery and the Human Body*.(Ill.#6)(8) I find this piece to be interesting mostly because it considers some of the issues I deal with formally as well as intellectually. Many works by Moholy- Nagy (photograph and sculpture), including his *Light display mobile* (9), possess visual elements that seem to have the same open and simple form as my work. In my opinion, many of these artists share a Constructivist/ Abstraction aspect to their work. I have labeled this aspect, “industrialism”, in terms of my own work.

The idea basically uses industrial materials, mainly new or used metal, to create abstract art forms. The viewer recognizes and understands the materials but sees them in unfamiliar constructions created by another human. They are physical manifestations of the artist’s ideas. It is this which helps to evoke different emotions and memories within the viewer. Works that might fit in this category typically are displayed in alternative spaces, like old factories and warehouses or within any large industrial gallery space.

Another basic idea of my work is the combination of industrial elements interacting with organic elements and the contrast that is the result. This concept came from living in the city as a child and seeing trees that interact with nearby iron gates and fences. Over time, the iron spikes and rails sometimes become imbedded within the living tree.

Scale and viewer interaction are important psychological factors in my work. Though many 'Industrial' artists work in monumental scale, I prefer human scale to encourage the interaction of the viewer and the piece. The two exist together in the same environment. The viewer takes the visual elements and reacts from personal, past experiences and ideas. To me this interaction is what makes a piece successful. If the viewer relates in a positive way when confronted with a work or the work holds the viewers attention, if only for a moment, then I feel the work is successful. It is that hint of recognition and impression that's exciting.

The ideas behind my recent work, although simple, come together in a dynamic way. Many people who view my works ask if they are representations of totems, but I always say no. The questions are understandable because of the verticality and the suggestion of a figure or spirit within the form. But like many of my influences, I disregard and change the spirituality of the original symbols to concentrate on physical form and shape.

Each piece that I created in this series has two main parts, an inner organic form and an outer structure. The inner forms are usually made of

hammered copper sheet and formed round. I then overlap parts and put them together by drilling holes along a given seam and attaching them with brass bolts. I used to create these by randomly adding segments until I felt the piece was complete. But, over time, I began to make paper models, enlarge them into cardboard models and use these as patterns for cutting the copper sheet.

The bolts I use in these inner 'figures' are usually sized to be half the inside diameter of the form. This is for two reasons. One being that for practical purposes one must have the ability to get the bolts and nuts in the piece without the bolts hitting end to end. The second reason for the extended bolts is more of an aesthetic one. I not only prefer the bolts to be longer than necessary as a visual element, but the extensions also act to exaggerate the connection points of the overlapping pieces.

These elements imply the construction of the form, but also imply the feeling of pins or ribs that visually seem to assist in securing air within the form. (Ill.#7) The overlapping copper is left with many open spaces throughout the form, again adding to the ability of air to flow within. This is frequently called negative space, but that seems too passive a concept to me. These open areas are important physical elements within each piece. This is sort of an unseen and abstract concept, but, like the wind, air flows in and out of the piece becoming turbulent in some areas and held motionless, or suspended, in others.

The second part of each sculpture is the outer structure . I began by using steel flat stock. This is usually one quarter inch by two to three inches by the length I wanted each sculpture's height to be. I would hot bend these rails where they attached to the square steel piping that form the structural bases. (Ill.#8) The rails would bend outwards (at roughly a forty-five degree angle), run straight up the main body of the sculpture, and bend back inward as they met the steel pipe at the top of the structure. Originally, I bent the side rails to add volume to the inside of the structure, allowing the feeling of space and free movement for the 'figure' within. However, I began to feel that the outer structure lacked enough rigidity in visual terms. There seemed to be too much space inside. So I began using straight rails to convey a stronger feeling of a support structure and not a bird cage, or prison. The idea for this came from harnesses that victims of spinal injuries wear to keep their heads immobile.

I attached the rails of the outer structure to the bases with extended zinc coated steel and/or stainless steel bolts . These bolts extended outwards, unlike the bolts in the inner 'figure'. They became spikes that were a visual element that I liked and which also referenced back to the 'Sky tassels' idea from the Thai spirit houses. Having the bolts coming out of the piece also gave the necessary contrast to the inner figure, which has only the caps of the bolts showing. Even though the inner figure and the outer structure are to come together as one piece I enjoy making them visually repel each other; much like magnetic poles. The finish of

the rail's surfaces were basically sanded to reveal a clean, steel-gray color. This created a contrast to the flesh tones on the copper inner figure.

When I attached the rails flush to the sides of the square bases, it gave the piece the look of a cage instead of support structure. This was not what I wanted, so I incorporated the use of copper and aluminum spacers to 'suspend' the rails away from the bases. I milled out the center of short lengths of round stock and placed them between the rails and the base with bolts running through them. This had two good effects. One was that the sides now seemed more like railings, adding negative space to the structure. The second was that the top piece of the structure now seemed to levitate, even though intellectually and physically you could see it was still attached.

Solving the problem of putting the 'figure' inside of the support structure was an evolutionary process.. I wanted to place the figure in a way that made it seem free floating. The first time I used threaded rods fished down through the figure and mounted onto a plate welded to the top of the square pipe. This was too dramatic a connection. The figure seemed too confined or restricted. I then came up with the idea of having the figure hanging from the top piece of the structure. I made a support bracket hidden on the inside of the figure and used threaded rod through a length of aluminum tubing to attach it to the top piece. The aluminum was light in color like the steel, so when the viewer took in the whole piece, the figure did seem to hover in place. The open part of the base that one could look

down into, added to the illusion that the figure was in a state of levitation.

The piece that I feel best expresses my ideas for the sculptures is the one that uses mostly aluminum for the outer structure. (Ill.#9) Aluminum has a softer, colder look to the surfaces, but also has the benefit of being lighter than steel. It's also much easier to work with in terms of ease of handling, surface finishing, drilling, and assembly. Surface finishing was accomplished very simply by sanding the surfaces in an orbital pattern which resulted in a white, almost frosted look. Ultimately, the aluminum structures have a much cleaner look and feel. This adds considerable dimension to the industrial concept.

Due to the slender, vertical height of these works, I needed a way of securing them and keeping them from toppling. This was both a practical and safety concern. So I made base floor plates out of flat steel plate with pipes welded vertically to accept the bottom of the square bases on the sculptures. This allowed the sculptures to be stable while being freestanding. Moving each one hundred pound plus sculpture became easier, because each one broke down into multiple pieces. I then had each base Powder Coated, an electro plating process which makes them more durable and able to handle the outdoor elements.

After I completed some of these sculptures I developed some ideas for creating wall pieces.(Ill.#7, 10) I fashioned five smaller scale pieces made in the same way as the inner figures of the larger pieces minus the support structure. I felt that the wall itself was already more confining than the structures so they

certainly didn't need the additional supports.

I liked these wall pieces but I don't think they were as dynamic in reality as they were in my mind. Alone they seemed empty or out of place. But amongst the other sculptures, occupying the same space, they seemed to make more sense, almost like a study of the final idea.

I spent more time dealing with the patina or coloring of the wall pieces, mainly because the viewer would get closer to these and would study the surfaces more closely. Using a soldering flux, a borax based paste, gave the wall pieces a hardier red and black pattern. This is achieved by way of brushing the paste on, firing each piece evenly to a hot cherry red in a furnace, and then quenching in water. This left the pieces with a fleshy, muscular look.(Ill.#10) Sometimes it's difficult to get the same look on each piece but this randomness of the color seemed only to benefit the overall look of each completed piece.

Minoring in painting added to my interest in color for my sculpture. Having been influenced greatly by Cubist and Abstract painters, I had the desire to incorporate painted representations of my sculpture work within the final grouping of works.(Ill.#11)

Being mainly concerned with color and line in painting this group of works, I used colors that corresponded with the colors in the sculptures. I built up a play of warm colors that flowed around strong edged, darker, cool colors. I mainly used a cubist style, but I tried to stay simple in form and with restricted

dimension. This directly referred to the sculptures' look and feel. I was also attempting to imply the idea of the circulation of air but in a more two dimensional language.

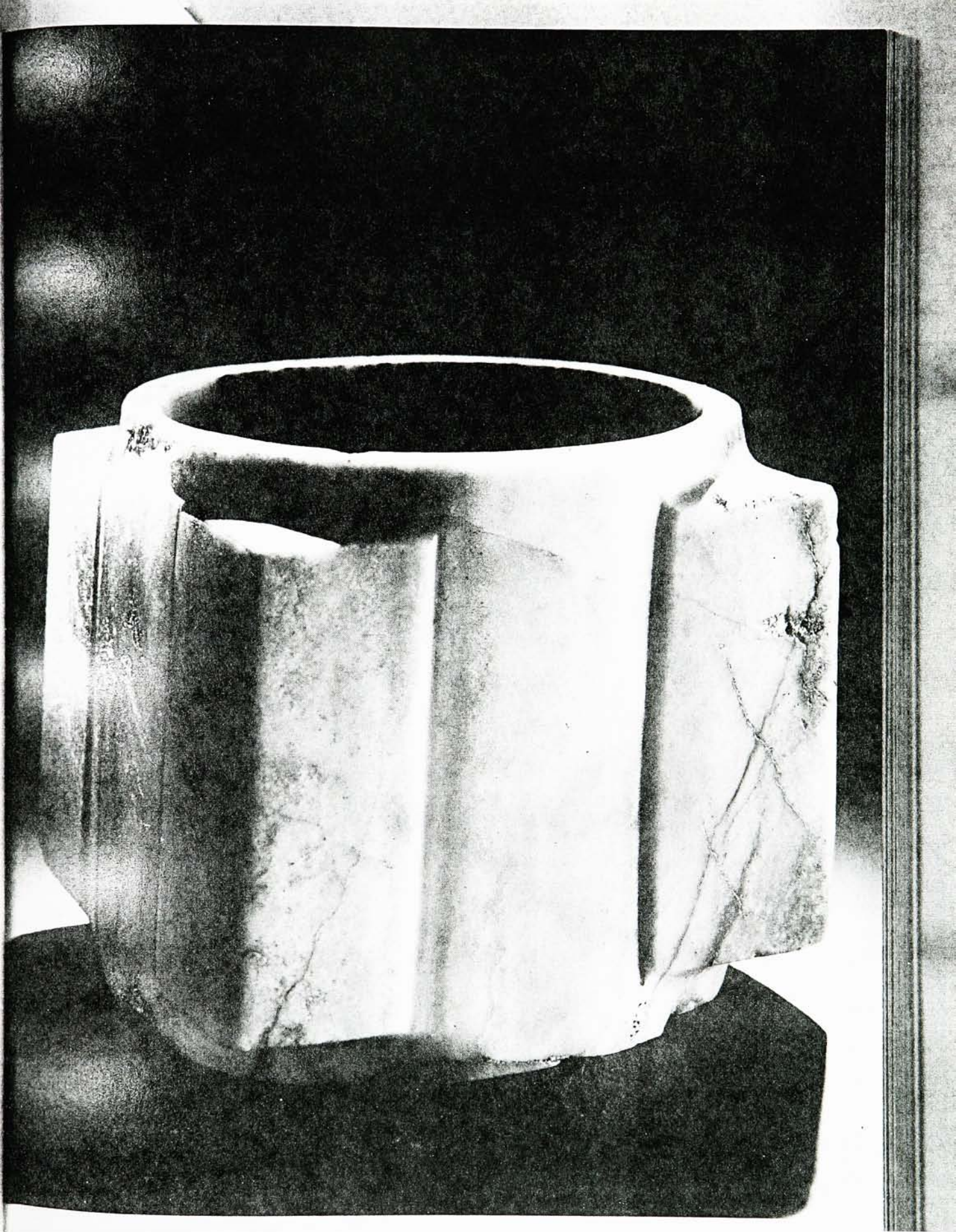
I feel each of these pieces work well together in a gallery space(Ill.#14), but I also feel that each piece stands on its own merit, independent of the group. Many of the pieces have been moved to outside locations,(Ill.#12, 13) and I feel they work as well outside as they do in interior spaces.

All of the steel outer structures have rusted to an even rust color and the inner figures are beginning to turn an oxidized copper green. (Ill.#13) I find this transformation exciting, because, even though I completed the works treating each surface a certain way, the pieces have taken on a life of their own. Through natural, physical change they have become a part of nature and are continuously changing with the elements. Having these pieces outside changes the idea from air living within the piece to the air and wind literally flowing thru, moving, and becoming part of each piece.

Working in the arts is a constant journey that consists of creating physical representations of ideas, ideas that, many times, come subconsciously and even unclearly. This is the challenge that drives the artist, interpreting personal perception and intellect, while trying to inspire others to see the world around us in a different light. It is our mission to encourage the viewers to relate in a way they never conceived, and, ultimately spur them to ask some new questions.

Art is the way to the *absolute* and to the essence of human life. The aim of art is not the one-sided promotion of spirit, soul and senses, but the *opening* of all human capacities- Thought, feeling, will- to the life rhythm of the world of nature.

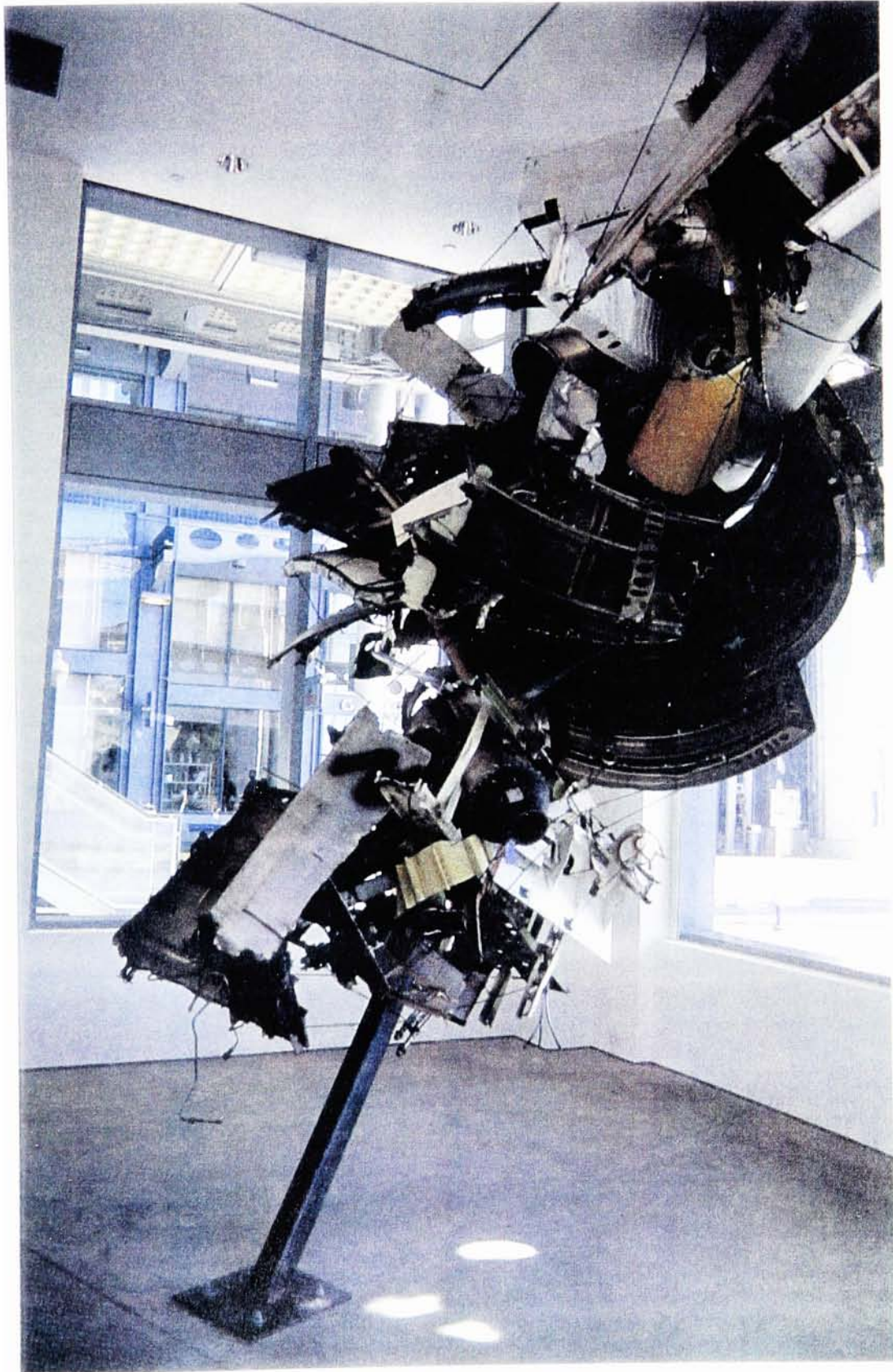
(Lee, pg.10)(10)

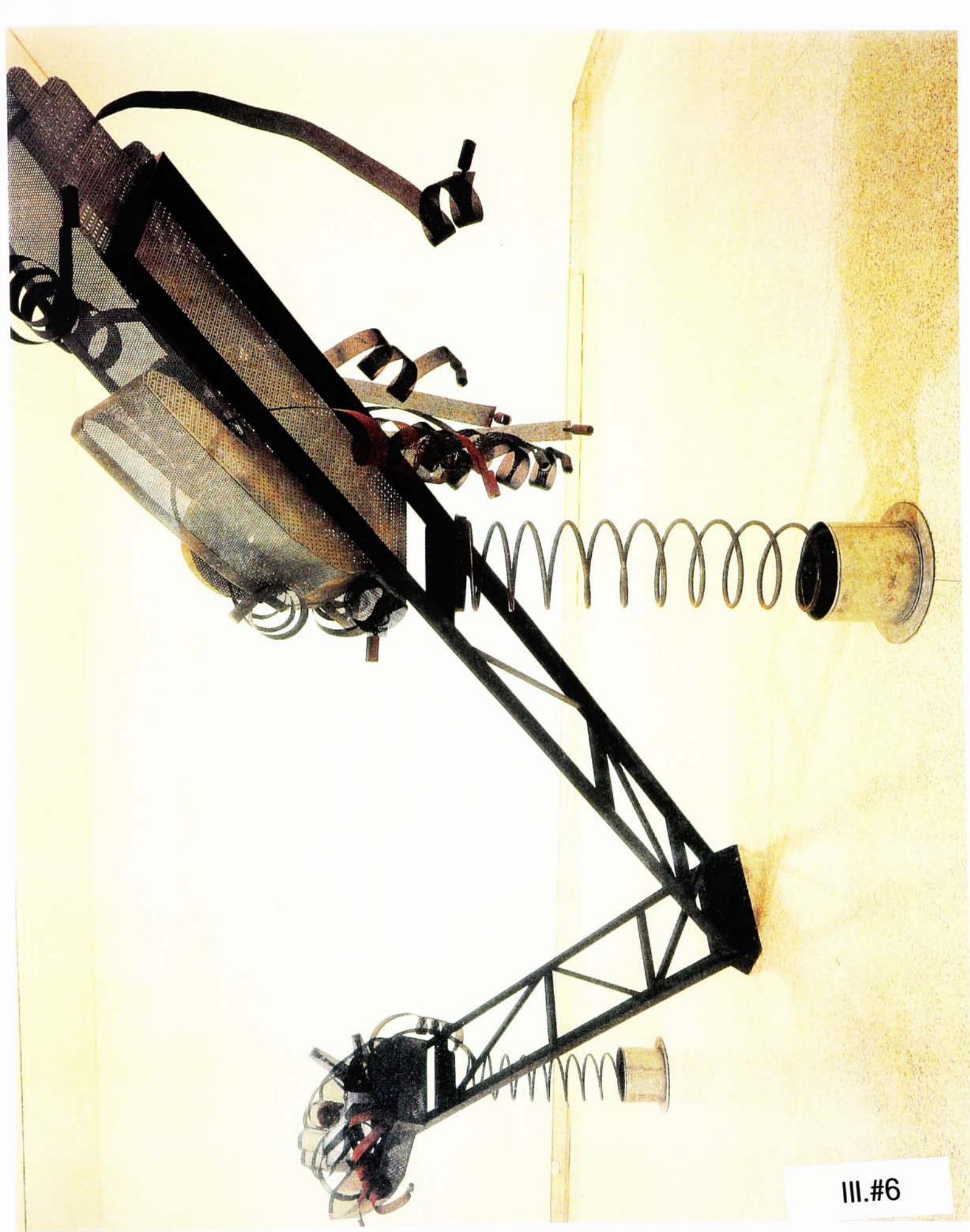








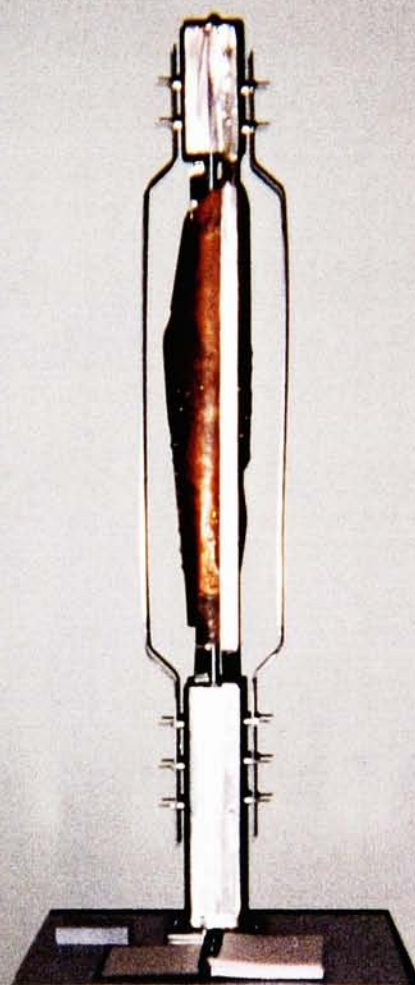




III.#6



III.#7



Reconstruction of Air

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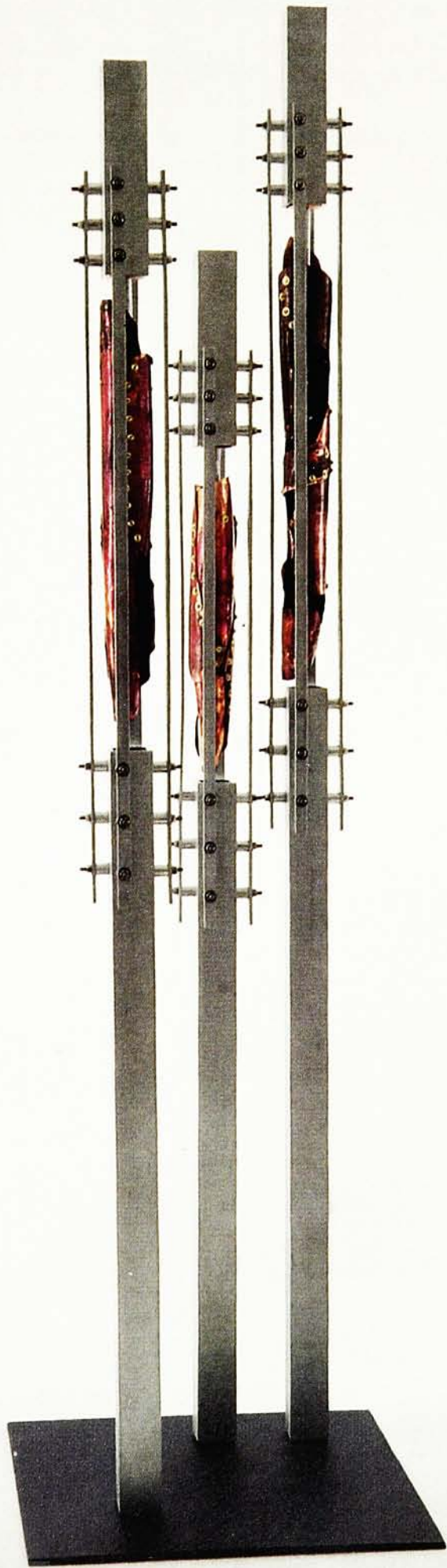
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Prof. Leonard Urso

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III.#9





III.#11



III.#12



III.#13



Endnotes

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